

Breaking butterflies on a wheel

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Well it's that time of the year again. As the southern hemisphere slowly warms to a new spring, so the annual Ig Nobel awards reappear. I have written about these previously, but to the uninitiated these awards embody the pinnacle of human achievement and represent eccentric and unusual research as an alternative to the "real" Nobel awards, which although awarded at the same time tend to be a little dry by comparison.

The winner in the Medicine category was the penetrating study published in our sister journal, *BMJ*, entitled "Sword swallowing and its side effects".¹ Rather unsurprisingly, the conclusions of the study noted that sword swallows run a higher risk of injury when they are beginning their careers, distracted or embellishing their performance. The Ig Nobel award ceremony at the Sander's Theatre at Harvard University was definitely embellished by

one of the study authors demonstrating his sword swallowing technique during his acceptance speech.

The award for Physics went to a landmark study of how sheets and drapes become wrinkled.² Not content with that, the authors went on to develop a general theory of wrinkling complete with mathematical formulae. Before you dismiss this work out of hand, you should realise that it was published in the journal *Nature*. No mean feat that.

My particular favourite was the award for Linguistics to the team from the University of Barcelona who found that rats sometimes (!) had equal trouble distinguishing Japanese spoken backwards from Dutch spoken backwards.³ The immediate significance of this work escapes me at present but I am sure it will come to me. Apparently, similar ideas have been studied in cotton-top tamarin monkeys. I must have missed that one in PubMed.

A close second in my mind was the Economics award for the invention of an infrared device to foil bank robbers by dropping a large bell-shaped net over them surrounded by a curtain (presumably so they cannot see the net) and then a lifting motors kicks in to lift the robbers off the ground, thereby rendering them effectively immobilised.⁴ I am sure I saw a similar device by the Acme corporation used by the coyote to try and catch the road runner unsuccessfully.

While my comments may seem a little churlish and disrespectful, I can assure the reader that my intentions are the opposite. I am in awe of some of this research and strive to achieve the ultimate success in academia—the Ig Nobel. For those who want more information, have a look at www.improbable.com and be astounded.

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